

LIFE AFTER THE GAME

The transition from professional athlete to retiree is often a rocky one, but players are figuring out how to live satisfying lives after the rush of competition and the roar of the crowd are gone

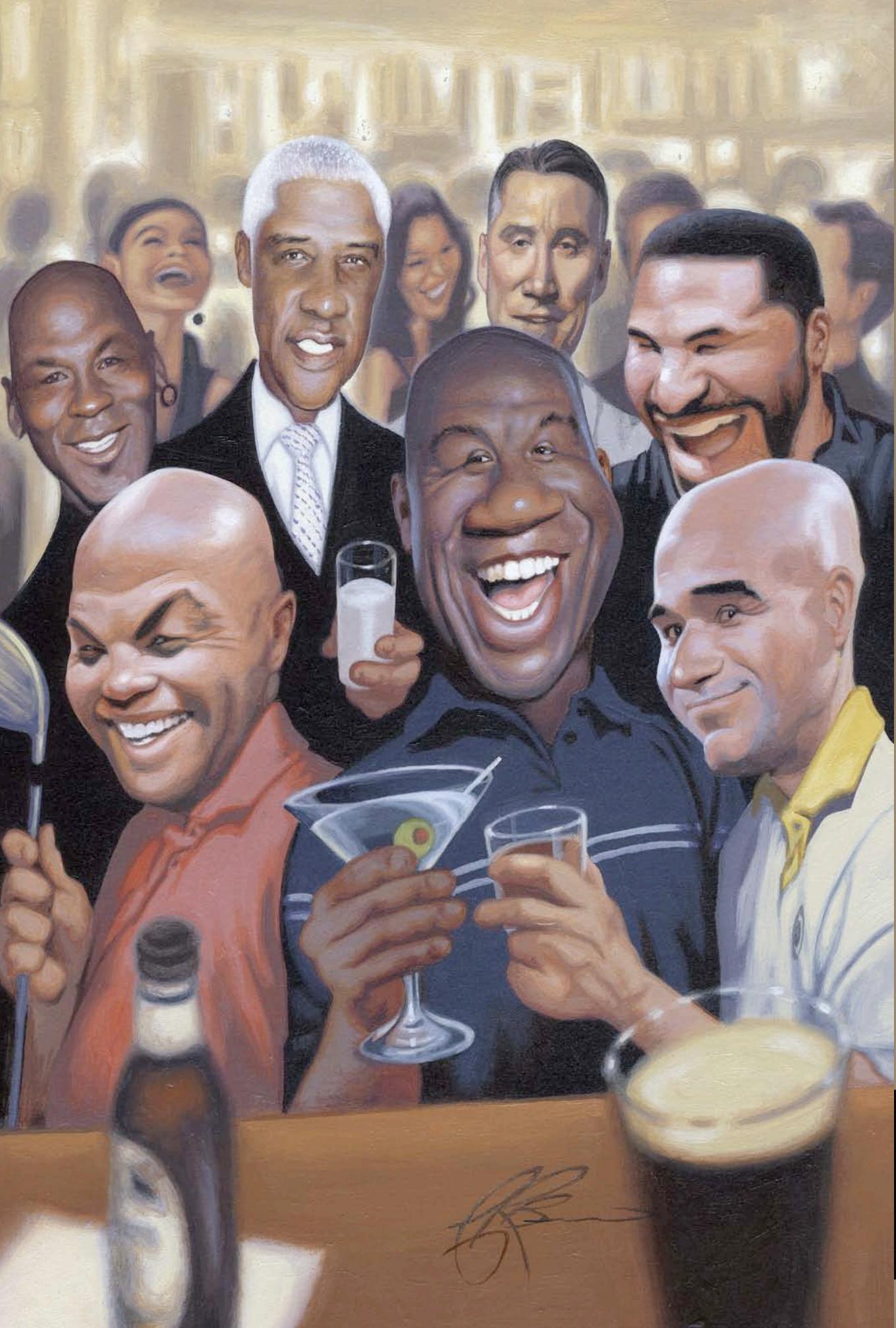
by
Larry
Platt

Illustration by
JAMES BENNETT

GOLDEN NOT-YET-OLDIES

Even the most recognizable stars—like (from left) Jordan, Barkley, Erving, Johnson, Glavine, Bettis and Agassi—must work to find a satisfying second career at an age when most people are just settling into their lives.





ERNIE

BANKS



NATE

NEWTON



HANK

AARON



1976

BUCS



BRIANA

SCURRY



DAN &

DAVE



KEVIN

EVERETT



ANGELO

PIZZO



MARCUS

DUPREE



HAROLD

MINER



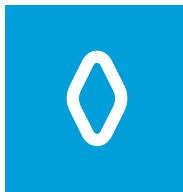
VAN EARL

WRIGHT



LIFEAFTER
SPORTS





NE MORNING in 1999, Charles Barkley's phone rang. It was his good friend Michael Jordan. Seven years earlier the two men had squared off in the NBA Finals. Now both were 36. Barkley's career was winding down in Houston—"I'm the artist formerly known as Barkley," he quipped—and Jordan had called it quits earlier in the year, after his Bulls won their sixth title in eight seasons. While golfing, Jordan and Barkley compared notes on the odd nature of retiring at an age at which most men were still looking forward to many productive years. This particular morning, on the phone, Jordan had a question.

"I just dropped the kids off at school," he said. "I've got nothing to do till I get them at three. What am I supposed to do all day?"

That question would come back to Barkley a year later, when his turn came to hang up his Nikes. He'd seen his friend struggle with reentry into civilian life: Shortly after retiring, Jordan got hooked on motorcycle thrill racing. Along with his nephew and a group of young adventure seekers, the greatest basketball player in history would speed and pop wheelies on deserted Chicago streets at three in the morning. He seemed to be in search of something—anything—that could replace the adrenaline rush of being the best in

making ill-advised comebacks to avoid the *What next?* abyss, he remembers his epiphany in the days following his own retirement. The rush of being among the best in your profession, at the most tender of ages? "You gotta let that go," Barkley says. "You can't replace that feeling."

PRO ATHLETES are schooled in the surreal at an early age. The most precocious, like Allen Iverson, are asked to sign autographs as adolescents. Adults representing high schools and colleges recruit them, offer them inducements, try to worm into their inner sanctums. When they're in their teens, packed stadiums chant their names, and if they're lucky, they don't retire until they're 30—when the rest of us are still settling into adulthood.

"Once you retire, the silence is deafening," says John Michels, the former Packers offensive lineman who gave up the game in 1999, at 26, having undergone six knee surgeries. He is one of 50-plus former athletes I've spoken with, and written about, over the last few years in a kind of odyssey through the subterranean world of jock retirement. "No one calls, not even your former teammates," Michels says. "It's like you've been kicked out of the locker room."

How hard is the transition? Fifteen years later, Michels still has a recurring dream: He's in the locker room putting on pads and helmet, and as

→ **SHORTLY AFTER RETIRING, THE GREATEST BASKETBALL PLAYER IN HISTORY GOT**



the world at what he did.

Barkley, though, had looked forward to retirement, saying he planned on "playing golf, learning to play the piano and getting really, really fat." (He never did learn the piano.) But one day he came home after a round of golf and asked his wife, Maureen, a simple question:

"How long have I been retired?"

"Um, a few months," she said.

That's all? Barkley thought. *Uh-oh. This can't be all there is.* So he began to remake himself into an uproarious media personality, one of TV's most successful class clowns. Ultimately he would earn more in his second career (an estimated \$6 million a year alone from TNT's *Inside the NBA*) than he did as a perennial All-Star with the 76ers, Suns and Rockets.

Now, when Barkley sees athletes hanging on,

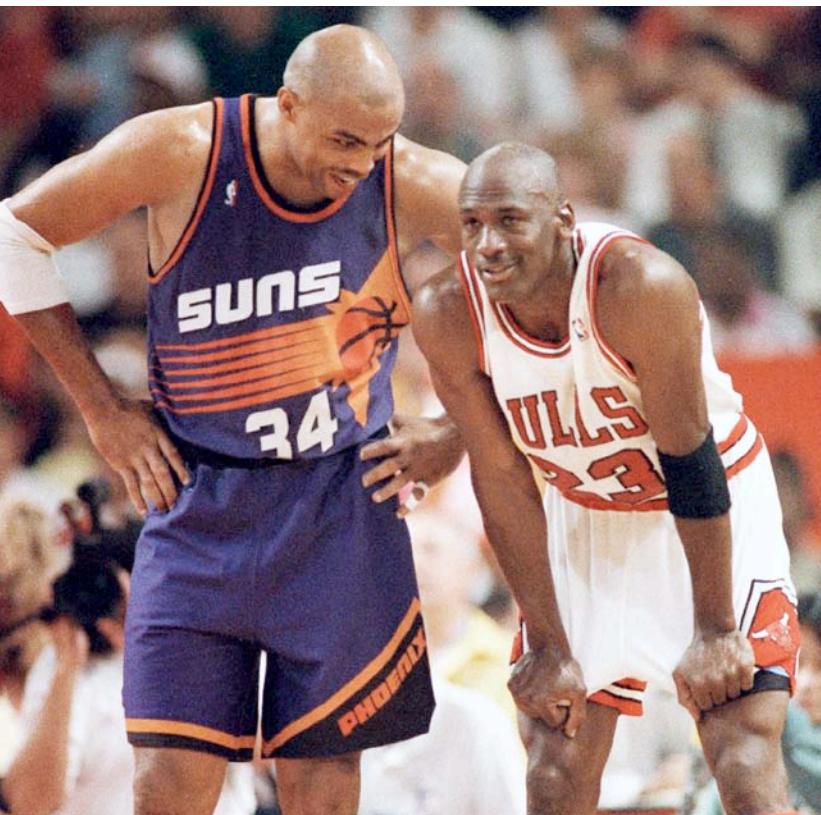
he makes his way to the field, he can hear the roar of the crowd building.

"Nothing can prepare you for athletic afterlife," says former major league pitcher turned entrepreneur Todd Stottlemyre. "In fact, the only thing we're supposed to prepare for is the next game. You're trained to be selfish. It's all about me, me, me. Then you quit and it's like, Hello, real world."

No wonder so few professional athletes (paging Brett Favre) have reached peace with this most unnatural of retirements. Michael Phelps retired after the London Olympics and spent the next 21 months living the freshman year he never really had. "I've spent the last 27 years of my life staring at a black line on the bottom of a pool," he said, explaining his new devotion to his social life. But in April he dived back in the pool.

Budding filmmaker Steve Nash this season produced the compelling documentary series *The Finish Line* on Grantland.com. In it he chronicles the oncoming end of his stellar NBA career, and evokes the phenomenon John Updike wrote about in "Hub

ROBERT BECK/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (PHELPS); SIMON BRUY/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (FABRE)



END GAME

Friendly rivals Barkley (above, left) and Jordan initially found their free time weighing heavy; Agassi (right) found fulfillment in charity; Phelps (far left) and Favre (left) struggled to know when it was time to bow out.



bankruptcy. “The hardest thing is getting guys to see that what you did is not who you are,” he says.

When former Packers offensive lineman Tom Neville, unemployed and depressed, was shot and killed in a standoff with police three years after his 1995 retirement, his fellow offensive lineman Ken Ruettggers phoned many of their former teammates so they could all talk together, for the first time, about the challenges of transition. Ruettggers found widespread depression and a lot of lost souls, and he could relate. “I should have been the poster boy for transition,” says Ruettggers, who had earned an M.B.A. while in the NFL. “But even I was having trouble finding a new purpose, passion and mission. When so much of your self-worth is tied up with what you did, then who are you?”

So Ruettggers wrote a dissertation on the topic to get his doctorate in sociology. He also founded Game’s Over, a nonprofit aimed at helping athletes navigate the rocky terrain of retirement. Today he teaches at Central Oregon Community College in Bend.

Andre Agassi once observed that “professional sports can keep people from becoming who they really are.” That hit home when Ruettggers’s research led him to the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale, a questionnaire that reveals the degree to which athletes view themselves as athletes. He found that they overwhelmingly suffer from “identity foreclosure”: They see themselves as athletes to the exclusion of all other identities, such as father, husband or businessman. It’s a common pitfall among mission-oriented people, such as first responders, CEOs and politicians: The job and the individual morph into one. And when the job is gone, so is the story the individual tells himself and others about who he is.

Loneliness is part of the problem too. “I remember feeling like my community was wiped away from me,” recalls former major league outfielder Reggie Sanders, who played for eight teams between 1991 and 2007 and now has an ownership stake in two minor league baseball teams, among other business interests. “You’re not in the clubhouse anymore, and it feels like you’ve lost your family. You’ve spent all this time with a support system—teammates, coaches, trainers—and a daily schedule, and that’s all gone.”

Many athletes are addicted to the camaraderie of the team, maybe even more than to the game itself.

The leagues—particularly the NFL and the NBA—and players’ associations have in recent years offered

HOOKED ON MOTORCYCLE THRILL RACING.

Fans Bid Kid Adieu,” his legendary essay about Ted Williams’s last game: “He had met the little death that awaits all athletes. He had quit.”

When sports stars are young, we revere them as warriors who never say die. Then as they age we ask them to hurry up and quit.

You’ve probably heard the statistics: Seventy-eight percent of NFL players go bankrupt or experience financial distress within two years of retirement. The same fate awaits 60% of NBA players within five years. Divorce rates for retired athletes range upward of 60%. The depression rate of retired NFL players is 11%, according to a 2006 University of North Carolina study.

NBA veteran Vin Baker, battling alcohol dependency and depression, went through career earnings of some \$80 million. Thanks in part to John Lucas, the former NBA coach turned life counselor to wayward jocks, Baker turned his life around and is now a minister.

The statistics and anecdotes address only the symptoms. Lucas, who overcame his own drug-and-alcohol demons, says the deeper issue is spiritual

more in the way of transition programs for former players, but these are mostly career-oriented curricula. The player himself remains essentially alone.

But a funny thing has happened. Across the country, communities of former jocks have sprung up organically. Retired athletes are trying to re-create, on some level, the locker room of their playing days. In Rancho Santa Fe, Calif., members of the major league diaspora have reassembled. Jamie Moyer, Trevor Hofmann, Vince Coleman and Mike Sweeney all live in the same neighborhood. Sweeney, the former American League slugger, coaches Little League, where he has coached 10-year-old hurler McCabe Moyer, about whom former Phils manager Charlie Manuel once observed, “He’s got a better fastball than Jamie.”

In Houston there are countless retired players, drawn by Lucas’s wellness program and holistic coaching methods, and by Texas’s lack of a state income tax. Miami and Orlando have their share of former pro athletes too. But the true ground zero of jock retirement is a multicultural Southern city with a great airport and even better golf courses.

are having smoke blown up their butts from the early teens on,” Cross says. “When that *there’s nothing else* moment arrives, they’re totally unprepared.” That’s when it can be comforting to be somewhere like Atlanta, where you at least have a sense that others have gone through what you’re experiencing.

Nowhere is there more of a fraternity feeling than at TJ’s sports bar in Alpharetta. This is Atlanta’s Cheers, and owner Tim Ecclestone is its Sam Malone. Ecclestone, 66, played for the NHL’s Atlanta Flames in the 1970s, along with former Calder Trophy winners Willi Plett and Eric (Big Train) Vail—and the three can be found most nights at TJ’s. They can also be found during the day on the links at Rivermont Country Club, which Julius Erving joined after the Tucker, Ga., golf club he owned, Celebrity Golf Club International, went belly-up in 2010. (Erving has had numerous financial setbacks of late, including foreclosure on his Utah home.)

At TJ’s, Ecclestone will show visitors his framed number 14 Flames jersey. “It took me a while to get the blood off it,” he says, pulling on a beer. “Unfortunately most of the blood was my own.” He and

→ NFL PLAYERS WHO GO BROKE OR SUFFER FINANCIAL DISTRESS SOON AFTER

A FEW YEARS BACK former 49ers interior lineman Randy Cross and his son, Brendan, were at a youth football camp not far from their home near Alpharetta, Ga., a tony suburb of Atlanta. A lot of former players reside in the Atlanta area; many live in Cross’s own development, Country Club of the South, with its manor homes and manicured lawns on the bank of the Chattahoochee River, roughly half an hour from midtown. On any given day in recent years, Cross has bumped into neighbors Tom Glavine and Ron Gant, both former Braves, or Brian Jordan, who played for both the Braves and the Falcons.

On this day, while on the sideline watching his son’s drills, Cross saw a blond dad across the field who looked vaguely familiar. It was former Packers quarterback Don Majkowski.

“Turns out, Don’s story was a lot like mine,” Cross recalled recently following his morning stint on sports radio station 92.9 The Game, whose lineup of hosts also featured former Steelers quarterback Kordell Stewart until he left in May. “He played elsewhere but settled on Atlanta once he was done. You can’t beat the golf, the airport and the real estate.”

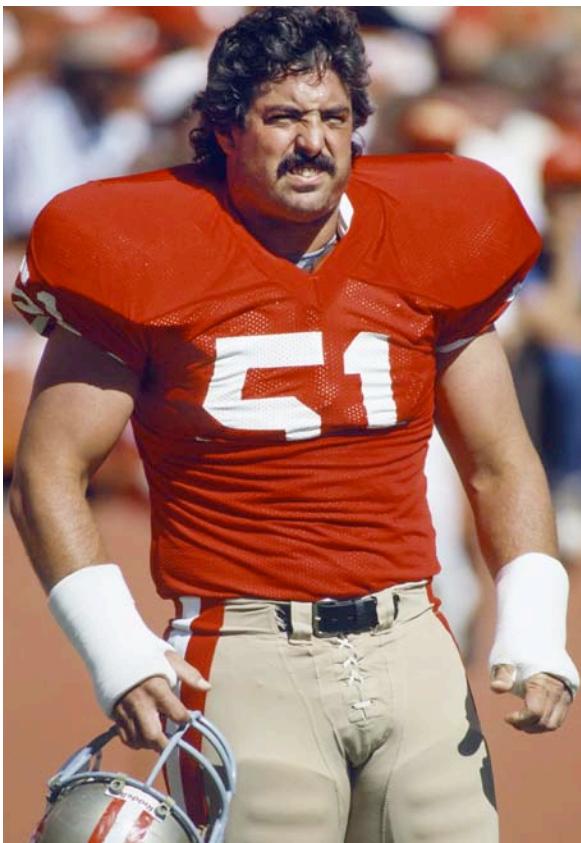
Cross retired at 34 in 1989, after 13 NFL seasons. He’s seen fellow athletes go through what he calls the “separation anxiety” of retirement. “The [media] coverage has exploded since I played, and these kids



his former teammates regale all comers with old war stories, and they scoff at the softness of today’s high-priced players. “Concussions?” says Ecclestone, whose salary topped out at \$75,000. “Back then, if you had those symptoms, we figured it just meant you were hung over.” On Saturday nights another Rivermont member will sweep into TJ’s (“Booth 4,” Ecclestone notes): Kevin Loughery, the former Hawks coach who was also Erving’s coach in his ABA days.

Meantime, Stewart, Cross’s former radio colleague at The Game, has bonded with his own group of former NFL players, with whom he preps before his afternoon show at Dave & Buster’s, on live remote. “Jerome Bettis is here, Hines Ward, Rodney Harrison, Wayne Gandy,” Stewart says. “We’ll play golf together. Or Ray Buchanan will call and say, ‘Let’s go out,’ and we’re off.”

ALL THELEANS FOR SPORTS (ILLUSTRATED, SAIBERS); DONATIANO DANIELI/GETTY IMAGES (MIDDLE); DONATIANO DANIELI/GETTY IMAGES (RIGHT); ILLUSTRATED (WILLIS); YERMON BEVIER/WIREIMAGE.COM (LEFTERS)



GOING STRONG

Cross (left) and (below from left) Sanders, Michels, Glavine, Willis and Ruettgers have found rewarding new pursuits.

TNT broadcasting mate Kenny Smith, or former NFL linebacker and Georgia native Takeo Spikes. In the uptown Buckhead district you're likely to catch a glimpse of Gant, now a morning anchor on Atlanta's Fox TV channel, at Chops Lobster Bar. Not far from there is Willis & Walker, the fashion store for big and tall men that belongs to former Hawk Kevin Willis. A 7-footer, Willis was in the NBA for 23 seasons, but the most crucial one turned out to be his fifth—when he was injured. He'd majored in fashion and textiles at Michigan State, and with time on his hands he took the NBA up on its offer of a New York City fashion internship. For four consecutive summers he apprenticed (for no pay) at fashion houses such as Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren.

"In the late '80s guys my size in the league wanted to look fly, but no one had our size," says Willis, stretched out in his showroom, surrounded by the high-end denim products that have become his focus. "When I broke my foot, it allowed me to step off that fast-lane NBA lifestyle, with the travel and the girls. I got hooked on fashion, man." He started by making leather jackets for his teammates, then custom suits. Today Willis & Walker wares are in Saks as well as all the high-end big-and-tall shops.

The gold standard for transitions from sports careers, however, remains that of Magic Johnson. Like Willis, Johnson started thinking about life after basketball while still playing. He'd just watched his Lakers teammate Kareem Abdul-Jabbar file for bankruptcy. During a home game, Johnson once told me, he paused in front of two courtside season-ticket holders, music executive Joe Smith and Hollywood mogul Peter Guber, and asked them, "How do I get into business?"

Smith and Guber set Johnson up with powerful Hollywood agent Michael Ovitz, but Ovitz blew him off, saying he didn't do business with athletes. "It's the only time in my life I felt 5' 9"," Johnson said. Three weeks later, when Ovitz surprisingly summoned Johnson for a follow-up meeting, Johnson knew that he had to put his ego aside to succeed, just as Willis had when he interned for no pay. Ovitz eventually was helpful in setting up Johnson's first business deal.

"Gotta put that ego to sleep, man," Willis says. "It's not about that. It's about doing what you have to do to get better every day."

He pauses. "I learned that from ball too," he says.

T O REACH the pinnacle of one's profession, particularly in the high-stakes realm of professional sports, it takes an almost toxic mix of self-delusion and denial. You have to live your swagger, because self-doubt is the quickest way to early retirement. But therein lies the rub.

Jerry Price, a marriage counselor who special-

RETIREMENT: 78% / NBA PLAYERS: 60%



Stewart's exit from the league at 33, in 2005, was involuntary; he still wanted to play football. Instead he played golf for four hours a day and visited some of the nation's finest courses, from Pebble Beach to Pine Valley. His handicap dropped to two. Amid the tabloid saga of his divorce from his wife, Porsha Williams, and her role on the reality TV show *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, he's raising his son, Syre, doing talk radio and opening a football camp that replicates the NFL-combine experience for young players.

Stewart can sometimes be seen out on the town in Atlanta, to which athletes have been drawn in part because of the city's reputation as a hip-hop hotbed. On any given night at STK, a steak house and lounge in midtown, fans might run into Barkley and his

DAVID MADISON/GETTY IMAGES (CROSS)

izes in aggressively treating former athletes, says they're prone to what he calls "twisted thinking." Their infidelities, secret lives and absentee fatherhood are all products of training they received early on. "If a person isn't held accountable by the time he's 16, he's locked in," Price says. "My clients are emotionally arrested."

His cure? The power of an in-your-face community. Price recruits a five-person committee that meets with the player in no-holds-barred sessions; they send written reports to Price, as does the player's spouse. A picture emerges of the player's different faces, with which Price confronts his client.

"I don't think I could have made it in the NFL without my twisted thinking," says an 11-year veteran whom Price has counseled. "I believed normal rules didn't apply to me. That helped on the field. In real life? Not so much."

Another example of a community coming together to help former players is Trilogi Athletes, a for-profit venture put together by entrepreneur Al Steele. Investors include numerous former athletes, including Stottlemire and Sanders. For \$15,000 per year



to injuries like his. He didn't have a degree in any of the sciences, but he resolved nonetheless to become a doctor. Twelve years and countless student loans later, he is a surgeon at the forefront of using interventional radiology techniques in orthopedic surgery. "Medical school was easy compared to training camp," Michels says. "When I perform surgery, I don't have some 300-pounder trying to knock the scalpel out of my hand."

Indeed, the athletes who seem most fulfilled after their playing days are those who, like Michels, have found a way to stand for something beyond the orbit of their own ego. Agassi's charter school for underserved kids in Las Vegas. Kevin Johnson's public service.

Moyer's bereavement camps for kids. Tennis prodigy turned nun Andrea Jaeger's camps for ill, abused or at-risk kids. Magic Johnson's inner-city economic empowerment initiatives and his leadership on AIDS issues.

Which gets us back to Barkley. Bill Bradley once said, "Behind all the years of practice and all the hours of glory waits the inexorable terror of living without the game," and Barkley remembers the terror.

→ SAYS A COUNSELOR FOR EX-ATHLETES, "MY CLIENTS ARE EMOTIONALLY ARRESTED."

PERSONA GRATA

Barkley gives generously to causes he believes in: "You gotta stand for something bigger than yourself."

members can get mentoring, make business contacts and take part in symposia on topics that run the gamut from financial literacy to coping with the shedding of their long-held identities. It aims to provide the things the retired athlete misses most: the sense of common purpose in the locker room, and an actual itinerary—something to do, somewhere to be. Steele makes a persuasive case that the former-jock demographic—he says there are two million former pro athletes and Olympians younger than 65 worldwide—is a sleeping giant in terms of economic impact.

But Lucas reminds us that to get to the heart of athletes' transition woes, we have to dig deeper. And Ruettgers, who made helping other ex-jocks part of his life's mission, says, "At the end of the day, transition is an opportunity to do something for other people. That's where real purpose comes from."

Remember Michels, the former lineman who, 15 years later, still dreams of playing? He battled depression—"You have to mourn the loss of your athletic career like it was a loved one," he says—before deciding that what he really wanted to do was help prevent other athletes from succumbing

"When you don't have a college degree," he says, "you don't feel qualified to do anything else."

"Magic figured out retirement," Barkley said, sitting in a bar one night a couple of years ago. He was musing on what could be next. He swore that his current TNT contract, which expires in two years, will be his last. He has ruminated on everything from running for governor in his home state of Alabama ("I don't have skeletons in my closet," he said, "I got whole damn cemeteries!") to becoming an NBA general manager. But he wants to do something meaningful.

That's why, he says, he underwrites \$1 million in scholarships at his Alabama high school and donates another \$1 million for minority recruitment efforts at Auburn. That's why he contributed \$1 million to Hurricane Katrina relief.

Few people know of these good works. "I'm not out here trying to impress you idiots in the media," he said, clinking glasses to show there were no hard feelings. "I don't do it to be told I'm some great guy. I do it 'cause you gotta stand for something bigger than yourself." Then Charles Barkley took a swig of his beer. "Otherwise, what's the point?" □